

Chapter 7

Higher Education in the Aftermath of the Pandemic: Lessons From Zambia and Eswatini

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected people's health and wellbeing and stretched their coping capacities with potential for multiple long-term psychosocial effects. Social interactions were inexorably affected if not altered. Education was probably the second most affected despite the young age-group due to the large number of people involved – teachers and supporting staff. Most low-income countries of Africa have young populations, which may explain the relatively low COVID-19 mortality rates on the continent. The focus in this chapter is higher education in the aftermath of the pandemic. The authors discuss how higher education institutions (HEIs) in the countries under discussion navigated the pandemic and remodelled to attain their objectives during and after the pandemic. They argue that the pandemic had enduring negative and positive effects. They conclude that although digitisation in learning and teaching in HEIs was underway, the pandemic accelerated its uptake.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic affected many aspects of humanity globally since its emergence in late 2019. It may be too early to write about its aftermath as it is still being reported in some parts of the world in August 2022 at the time of writing. Nonetheless, its impact is evident globally. The pandemic has had more than just health implications in that people's coping capacities were overstretched with potential for multiple enduring psychosocial and other effects. Social interactions were severely affected if not altered. Aside from health, education was probably the second most affected sector due to the large number of people associated with it, that is, the school-going age-group and teachers involved as well as supporting staff. The closure of schools for extended periods severely impacted on the welfare of the school-going age group as it restricted their interactions with their friends at school.

Azvedo et al. (2020) estimated that the pandemic left more than a billion students out of school. According to UNICEF (2021), this represents 94 percent of students worldwide while a third could not access remote learning. Thus, although the school-going age was less at risk from the pandemic whose fatality was said to increase with age, (United Nations, 2020; Remuzzi and Remuzzi, 2020), the education sector has a large number of young people globally. Most low-income countries of Africa, including the two under discussion have young populations which may explain low COVID-19 mortality on the continent. As discussed later in this chapter, majority of the victims who experienced the negative effects of the pandemic such as domestic and sexual abuse as well as orphanhood, were young people. These vices escalated when schools were closed at the height of the pandemic.

The higher education sector in developing countries, which is our focus, was facing some challenges prior to the pandemic. The challenges included but were not limited to increased enrolments, reduced public funding, and competition for resources. Therefore, the pandemic exacerbated these challenges and even added more. Some learners dropped out of school; some delayed their completion while others completed under difficult circumstances. Without doubt, there were also losses in the quality of education as most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were using online learning and teaching for the first time with limited capacities and resources. Conversely, employment opportunities and earning prospects are likely to be delayed and compromised which is likely to result in long term challenges over the life course. Azvedo et al (2020) estimated that, the closure of schools during the pandemic is likely to lead to about \$872 losses in annual earnings for this cohort.

As the pandemic heightened, all HEIs closed; some immediately switched to online learning and teaching; while others had to wait, mobilise resources, and build capacities of learners and educators before adopting it. Over time, online teaching and learning has become the sole mode of continuing with education during the health crisis. The switch to online teaching and learning was not straight forward as discussed later in this chapter. There were inevitable challenges in access and affordability of ICT resources, utilisation of online and other ICT resources, poor connectivity, among others. These challenges were not exclusive to students, the teaching staff also struggled with these, not to mention issues of assessment quality and academic integrity.

In discussing higher education in the aftermath of the pandemic, this chapter will focus on the higher education trinity of teaching and learning; research and innovation; and community engagement or social contribution. That is, how HEIs in the countries under discussion remodelled the attainment of these objectives during and after the pandemic, the sustainability of those measures and further plans for the future with or without the pandemic. Other areas of focus will be on partnerships and support from gov-

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